

Reserve List for English 101/Leah Vetne
Sections 22613 and 22828
Fall 2004

Vertical File #3: *Racial/Cultural Perceptions & Perspectives*

1. "Just Walk On By" by Brent Staples, Interacting with Essays, 174-177
 2. "They Myth of the Latina Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria" by Judith Ortiz Cofer, Interacting with Essays, 179-184
 3. "Don't Misread My Signals" by Judith Ortiz Cofer, The Compact Reader: Short Essays By Method and Theme, 307-310
 4. "Banana" by Aliza Kimhachandra, The Compact Reader: Short Essays By Method and Theme, 313-316
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May, Charles E., ed. *Interacting with Essays*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996.

James, William Faulkner, Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, and John Irving? Is he narrowing the relevance of his argument to writers? Does his conclusion suggest that this essay is Theroux's personal complaint against American attitudes toward male writers like himself?

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Just Walk On By

BRENT STAPLES

Brent Staples was born in Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1951. He received his B.A. in 1973 from Widener University in Chester, Pennsylvania, and his Ph.D. in psychology in 1982 from the University of Chicago. After working as a reporter for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, he began writing for the *New York Times* in 1985, for which he became assistant metropolitan editor in 1990. He has written for *Down Beat*, *Harpers*, *Ms.*, and other magazines.

In this frequently reprinted essay, Staples writes a firsthand account of what it feels like to be feared for no other reason than the color of one's skin. He describes the alienation that results from forever being a suspect and concludes with his own simple device for reducing tension in those he passes.

1 My first victim was a woman—white, well dressed, probably in her early twenties. I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park, a relatively affluent neighborhood in an otherwise mean, impoverished section of Chicago. As I swung onto the avenue behind her, there seemed to be a discreet, uninflamatory distance between us. Not so. She cast back a worried glance. To her, the youngish black man—a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket—seemed menacingly close. After a few more quick glimpses, she picked up her pace and was soon running in earnest. Within seconds she disappeared into a cross street.

2 That was more than a decade ago. I was 22 years old, a graduate student newly arrived at the University of Chicago. It was in the echo of that terrified woman's footfalls that I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I'd come into—the ability to alter public space in ugly ways. It was clear that she thought herself the quarry of a mugger, a rapist, or worse. Suffering a bout of insomnia, however, I was stalking sleep, not defenseless wayfarers. As a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken—let alone hold it to a person's throat—I was surprised, embarrassed, and dismayed all at once. Her flight made me feel like an ac-

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complice in tyranny. It also made it clear that I was indistinguishable from the muggers who occasionally seeped into the area from the surrounding ghetto. That first encounter, and those that followed, signified that a vast, unnerving gulf lay between nighttime pedestrians—particularly women—and me. And I soon gathered that being perceived as dangerous is a hazard in itself. I only needed to turn a corner into a dicey situation, or crowd some frightened, armed person in a foyer somewhere, or make an errant move after being pulled over by a policeman. Where fear and weapons meet—and they often do in urban America—there is always the possibility of death.

In that first year, my first away from my hometown, I was to become 3 thoroughly familiar with the language of fear. At dark, shadowy intersections in Chicago, I could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the *thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk* of the driver—black, white, male, or female—hammering down the door locks. On less traveled streets after dark, I grew accustomed to but never comfortable with people who crossed to the other side of the street rather than pass me. Then there were the standard unpleasanties with police, doormen, bouncers, cab drivers, and others whose business it is to screen out troublesome individuals before there is any nastiness.

I moved to New York nearly two years ago and I have remained an 4 avid night walker. In central Manhattan, the near-constant crowd cover minimizes tense one-on-one street encounters. Elsewhere—visiting friends in SoHo, where sidewalks are narrow and tightly spaced buildings shut out the sky—things can get very taut indeed.

Black men have a firm place in New York mugging literature. Norman Podhoretz in his famed (or infamous) 1963 essay, "My Negro Problem—And Ours," recalls growing up in terror of black males; they "were tougher than we were, more ruthless," he writes—and as an adult on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, he continues, he cannot constrain his nervousness when he meets black men on certain streets. Similarly, a decade later, the essayist and novelist Edward Hoagland extols a New York where once "Negro bitterness bore down mainly on other Negroes." Where some see mere panhandlers, Hoagland sees "a mugger who is clearly screwing up his nerve to do more than just ask for money." But Hoagland has "the New Yorker's quick-hunch posture for broken-field maneuvering," and the bad guy swerves away.

I often witness that "hunch posture," from women after dark on the 6 warrenlike streets of Brooklyn where I live. They seem to set their faces on neutral and, with their purse straps strung across their chests bandolier style, they forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled. I understand, of course, that the danger they perceive is not a hallucination. Women are particularly vulnerable to street violence, and young black males are drastically overrepresented among the

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perpetrators of that violence. Yet these truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever the suspect, against being set apart, a fearsome entity with whom pedestrians avoid making eye contact.

7 It is not altogether clear to me how I reached the ripe old age of 22 without being conscious of the lethality nighttime pedestrians attributed to me. Perhaps it was because in Chester, Pennsylvania, the small, angry industrial town where I came of age in the 1960s, I was scarcely noticeable against a backdrop of gang warfare, street knifings, and murders. I grew up one of the good boys, had perhaps a half-dozen fist fights. In retrospect, my shyness of combat has clear sources.

8 Many things go into the making of a young thug. One of those things is the consummation of the male romance with the power to intimidate. An infant discovers that random flailings send the baby bottle flying out of the crib and crashing to the floor. Delighted, the joyful babe repeats those motions again and again, seeking to duplicate the feat. Just so, I recall the points at which some of my boyhood friends were finally seduced by the perception of themselves as tough guys. When a mark cowered and surrendered his money without resistance, myth and reality merged—and paid off. It is, after all, only manly to embrace the power to frighten and intimidate. We, as men, are not supposed to give an inch of our lane on the highway; we are to seize the fighter's edge in work and in play and even in love; we are to be valiant in the face of hostile forces.

9 Unfortunately, poor and powerless young men seem to take all this nonsense literally. As a boy, I saw countless tough guys locked away; I have since buried several, too. They were babies, really—a teenage cousin, a brother of 22, a childhood friend in his mid-twenties—all gone down in episodes of bravado played out in the streets. I came to doubt the virtues of intimidation early on. I chose, perhaps even unconsciously, to remain a shadow—timid, but a survivor.

10 The fearsomeness mistakenly attributed to me in public places often has a perilous flavor. The most frightening of these confusions occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s when I worked as a journalist in Chicago. One day, rushing into the office of a magazine I was writing for with a deadline story in hand, I was mistaken for a burglar. The office manager called security and, with an ad hoc posse, pursued me through the labyrinthine halls, nearly to my editor's door. I had no way of proving who I was. I could only move briskly toward the company of someone who knew me.

11 Another time I was on assignment for a local paper and killing time before an interview. I entered a jewelry store on the city's affluent Near North Side. The proprietor excused herself and returned with an enormous red Doberman pinscher straining at the end of a leash. She stood,

the dog extended toward me, silent to my questions, her eyes bulging nearly out of her head. I took a cursory look around, nodded, and bade her good night. Relatively speaking, however, I never fared as badly as another black male journalist. He went to nearby Waukegan, Illinois, a couple of summers ago to work on a story about a murderer who was born there. Mistaking the reporter for the killer, police hauled him from his car at gunpoint and but for his press credentials would probably have tried to book him. Such episodes are not uncommon. Black men trade tales like this all the time.

In "My Negro Problem—And Ours," Podhoretz writes that the hatred he feels for blacks makes itself known to him through a variety of avenues—one being his discomfort with that "special brand of paranoid touchiness" to which he says blacks are prone. No doubt he is speaking here of black men. In time, I learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal. Not to do so would surely have led to madness—via that special "paranoid touchiness" that so annoyed Podhoretz at the time he wrote the essay.

I began to take precautions to make myself less threatening. I move about with care, particularly late in the evening. I give a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hours, particularly when I have exchanged business clothes for jeans. If I happen to be entering a building behind some people who appear skittish, I may walk by, letting them clear the lobby before I return, so as not to seem to be following them. I have been calm and extremely congenial on those rare occasions when I've been pulled over by the police.

And on late-evening constitutionals along streets less traveled by, I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers. Even steely New Yorkers hunching toward nighttime destinations seem to relax, and occasionally they even join in the tune. Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn't be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. It is my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country.

EXPLORING IDEAS

1. In paragraph 1, Staples describes his first encounter with someone afraid of him because of his appearance. Was the young woman wrong to be afraid? Are we never justified in making a judgment on people based on their appearance? Argue for or against this question, providing examples to support your point.
2. Staples says he was not what the young woman thought he was. Rather than a mugger, rapist, or worse, he was just a softy suffering from insomnia. Try to

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- recall an incident on appearance, or was found out to be incorrect. Does the experience prove anything?
3. Staples says he does not like the sense of alienation he feels by being set apart as some "fearsome entity." Try to think of someone you have known or have read about who desires this sense of being a "fearsome entity." Are soldiers and athletes taught to be "fearsome entities"?
4. Brainstorm Staples's comments about the male romance with the power to intimidate. Write an essay in which you support and explain this aspect of male behavior.
5. Staples says that the basic stereotype for men is that they are not supposed to give an inch on the highway, are supposed to assume the fighter's edge in work, play, and love, and are supposed to be valiant in the face of hostile forces. Is all of this nonsense, as Staples suggests, or is there some value in such an image? Discuss both the positive and the negative aspects of this image of men.
6. Staples provides several anecdotes about how black men are mistaken for dangerous criminals, noting that "Such episodes are not uncommon. Black men trade tales like this all the time." Regardless of your race, has such an error ever been made about you? Describe the event, and discuss what it meant to you.
7. What basic stereotype is suggested by Staples's whistling melodies from classical music when he walks along at night?

EXPLORING RHETORIC

1. Why does Staples begin his essay with the sentence, "My first victim was a woman . . ." ? What effect does the word "victim" have on the reader?
2. Note the rhetorical techniques Staples uses. First, he opens with an anecdote that illustrates the point he wants to make; second, he provides the background for the anecdote and states what it means; and third, he provides some additional examples of the point. Using the same tactics, write an essay about an experience in which someone reacted to you in a way that surprised you.
3. Discuss the effectiveness of Staples's use of the following metaphors in paragraphs 2 and 3: "the unwieldy inheritance I'd come into"; "she thought herself the quarry of a mugger, a rapist, or worse"; "I was stalking sleep"; "muggers who occasionally seeped into the area from the surrounding ghetto"; "a vast, unnerving gulf lay between"; "the language of fear"; "hammering down the door locks"; "whose business it is to screen out troublesome individuals." Explain the basis of each one of these metaphors.
4. Comment on Staples's use of the following metaphoric language: "I often witness that 'hunch posture,' from women after dark on the warrenlike streets of Brooklyn where I live. They seem to set their faces on neutral and, with their purse straps strung across their chests bandolier style, they forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled." Rewrite the sentence without metaphors, and then comment on the difference between the two sentences.

out of the crib. How does the analogy illustrate the concept of the merging of myth and reality?

6. Although beginning a number of sentences in the same way is not usually effective, Staples uses this rhetorical technique in paragraph 13. How is this technique effective here? How does he vary the sentences so they do not seem simplistic and repetitive?
7. Discuss the effectiveness of Staples's final metaphor: "the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country." Is this a trivial conclusion or a relevant one?
8. Discuss the overall tone of Staples's essay. Is it angry, amused, puzzled, hurt, indifferent? Point out specific details to support your analysis.

The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María

JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

Judith Ortiz Cofer was born in 1952 in Puerto Rico and moved to New Jersey with her family when she was a small child. She was educated at the University of Georgia, Florida Atlantic University, and Oxford University and has taught English at the University of Georgia. Her books include a novel, *The Line of the Sun*, 1985; a collection of essays and stories, *Silent Dancing*, 1990; a collection of poetry, *Terms of Survival, Reaching for the Mainland*, 1987.

Using her own experience as an example of the stereotypes that follow Latinas, Cofer explains how Anglos misinterpret Hispanic cultural signals and argues that the media perpetuate these misinterpretations by presenting Latin women as either whores or domestic servants.

On a bus trip to London from Oxford University where I was earning some graduate credits one summer, a young man, obviously fresh from a pub, spotted me and as if struck by inspiration went down on his knees in the aisle. With both hands over his heart he broke into an Irish tenor's rendition of "María" from *West Side Story*. My politely amused fellow passengers gave his lovely voice the round of gentle applause it deserved. Though I was not quite as amused, I managed my version of an English smile: no show of teeth, no extreme contortions of the facial muscles—I was at this time of my life practicing reserve and cool. Oh, that British control, how I coveted it. But María had followed me to London, reminding me of a prime fact of my life: you can leave the Island, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you are

a Latina, especially one like me who so obviously belongs to Rita Moreno's gene pool, the Island travels with you.

² This is sometimes a very good thing—it may win you that extra minute of someone's attention. But with some people, the same things can make *you* an island—not so much a tropical paradise as an Alcatraz, a place nobody wants to visit. As a Puerto Rican girl growing up in the United States and wanting like most children to “belong,” I resented the stereotype that my Hispanic appearance called forth from many people I met.

³ Our family lived in a large urban center in New Jersey during the sixties, where life was designed as a microcosm of my parents' *casas* on the island. We spoke in Spanish, we ate Puerto Rican food bought at the bodega, and we practiced strict Catholicism complete with Saturday confession and Sunday mass at a church where our parents were accommodated into a one-hour Spanish mass slot, performed by a Chinese priest trained as a missionary for Latin America.

⁴ As a girl I was kept under strict surveillance, since virtue and modesty were, by cultural equation, the same as family honor. As a teenager I was instructed on how to behave as a proper *señorita*. But it was a conflicting message girls got, since the Puerto Rican mothers also encouraged their daughters to look and act like women and to dress in clothes our Anglo friends and their mothers found too “mature” for our age. It was, and is, cultural, yet I often felt humiliated when I appeared at an American friend's party wearing a dress more suitable to a semiformal than to a playroom birthday celebration. At Puerto Rican festivities, neither the music nor the colors we wore could be too loud. I still experience a vague sense of letdown when I'm invited to a “party” and it turns out to be a marathon conversation in hushed tones rather than a fiesta with salsa, laughter, and dancing—the kind of celebration I remember from my childhood.

⁵ I remember Career Day in our high school, when teachers told us to come dressed as if for a job interview. It quickly became obvious that to the barrio girls, “dressing up” sometimes meant wearing ornate jewelry and clothing that would be more appropriate (by mainstream standards) for the company Christmas party than as daily office attire. That morning I had agonized in front of my closet, trying to figure out what a “career girl” would wear because, essentially, except for Marlo Thomas on TV, I had no models on which to base my decision. I knew how to dress for school: at the Catholic school I attended we all wore uniforms; I knew how to dress for Sunday mass, and I knew what dresses to wear for parties at my relatives' homes. Though I do not recall the precise details of my Career Day outfit, it must have been a composite of the above choices. But I remember a comment my friend (an Italian-American) made in later years that coalesced my impressions of that day. She said

that at the business school she was attending the Puerto Rican girls always stood out for wearing “everything at once.” She meant, of course, too much jewelry, too many accessories. On that day at school, we were simply made the negative models by the nuns who were themselves not credible fashion experts to any of us. But it was painfully obvious to me that to the others, in their tailored skirts and silk blouses, we must have seemed “hopeless” and “vulgar.” Though I now know that most adolescents feel out of step much of the time, I also know that for the Puerto Rican girls of my generation that sense was intensified. The way our teachers and classmates looked at us that day in school was just a taste of the culture clash that awaited us in the real world, where prospective employers and men on the street would often misinterpret our tight skirts and jingling bracelets as a come-on.

Mixed cultural signals have perpetuated certain stereotypes—for example, that of the Hispanic woman as the “Hot Tamale” or sexual firebrand. It is a one-dimensional view that the media have found easy to promote. In their special vocabulary, advertisers have designated “sizzling” and “smoldering” as the adjectives of choice for describing not only the foods but also the women of Latin America. From conversations in my house I recall hearing about the harassment that Puerto Rican women endured in factories where the “boss men” talked to them as if sexual innuendo was all they understood and, worse, often gave them the choice of submitting to advances or being fired.

It is custom, however, not chromosomes, that leads us to choose scarlet over pale pink. As young girls, we were influenced in our decisions about clothes and colors by the women—older sisters and mothers who had grown up on a tropical island where the natural environment was a riot of primary colors, where showing your skin was one way to keep cool as well as to look sexy. Most important of all, on the island, women perhaps felt freer to dress and move more provocatively, since, in most cases, they were protected by the traditions, mores, and laws of a Spanish/Catholic system of morality and machismo whose main rule was: *You may look at my sister, but if you touch her I will kill you.* The extended family and church structure could provide a young woman with a circle of safety in her small pueblo on the island; if a man “wronged” a girl, everyone would close in to save her family honor.

This is what I have gleaned from my discussions as an adult with older Puerto Rican women. They have told me about dressing in their best party clothes on Saturday nights and going to the town's plaza to promenade with their girlfriends in front of the boys they liked. The males were thus given an opportunity to admire the women and to express their admiration in the form of *piropos*: erotically charged street poems they composed on the spot. I have been subjected to a few *piropos* while visiting the Island, and they can be outrageous, although custom

dictates that they must never cross into obscenity. This ritual, as I understand it, also entails a show of studied indifference on the woman's part; if she is "decent," she must not acknowledge the man's impassioned words. So I do understand how things can be lost in translation. When a Puerto Rican girl dressed in her idea of what is attractive meets a man from the mainstream culture who has been trained to react to certain types of clothing as a sexual signal, a clash is likely to take place. The line I first heard based on this aspect of the myth happened when the boy who took me to my first formal dance leaned over to plant a sloppy overeager kiss painfully on my mouth, and when I didn't respond with sufficient passion said in a resentful tone: "I thought you Latin girls were supposed to mature early"—my first instance of being thought of as a fruit or vegetable—I was supposed to *ripen*, not just grow into womanhood like other girls.

9 It is surprising to some of my professional friends that some people, including those who should know better, still put others "in their place." Though rarer, these incidents are still commonplace in my life. It happened to me most recently during a stay at a very classy metropolitan hotel favored by young professional couples for their weddings. Late one evening after the theater, as I walked toward my room with my new colleague (a woman with whom I was coordinating an arts program), a middle-aged man in a tuxedo, a young girl in satin and lace on his arm, stepped directly into our path. With his champagne glass extended toward me, he exclaimed, "Evita!"

10 Our way blocked, my companion and I listened as the man half-recited, half-bellowed "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina." When he finished, the young girl said: "How about a round of applause for my daddy?" We complied, hoping this would bring the silly spectacle to a close. I was becoming aware that our little group was attracting the attention of the other guests. "Daddy" must have perceived this too, and he once more barred the way as we tried to walk past him. He began to shout-sing a ditty to the tune of "La Bamba"—except the lyrics were about a girl named María whose exploits all rhymed with her name and gonorrhea. The girl kept saying, "Oh, Daddy" and looking at me with pleading eyes. She wanted me to laugh along with the others. My companion and I stood silently waiting for the man to end his offensive song. When he finished, I looked not at him but at his daughter. I advised her calmly never to ask her father what he had done in the army. Then I walked between them and to my room. My friend complimented me on my cool handling of the situation. I confessed to her that I really had wanted to push the jerk into the swimming pool. I knew that this same man—probably a corporate executive, well educated, even worldly by most standards—would not have been likely to regale a white woman with a dirty song in public. He would perhaps have checked his impulse by assum-

ing that she could be somebody's wife or mother, or at least *somebody* who might take offense. But to him, I was just an Evita or a María: merely a character in his cartoon-populated universe.

Because of my education and my proficiency with the English language, I have acquired many mechanisms for dealing with the anger I experience. This was not true for my parents, nor is it true for the many Latin women working at menial jobs who must put up with stereotypes about our ethnic group such as: "They make good domestics." This is another facet of the myth of the Latin woman in the United States. Its origin is simple to deduce. Work as domestics, waitressing, and factory jobs are all that's available to women with little English and few skills. The myth of the Hispanic menial has been sustained by the same media phenomenon that made "Mammy" from *Gone with the Wind* America's idea of the black woman for generations; María, the housemaid or counter girl, is now indelibly etched into the national psyche. The big and the little screens have presented us with the picture of the funny Hispanic maid, mispronouncing words and cooking up a spicy storm in a shiny California kitchen.

This media-engendered image of the Latina in the United States has 12 been documented by feminist Hispanic scholars, who claim that such portrayals are partially responsible for the denial of opportunities for upward mobility among Latinas in the professions. I have a Chicana friend working on a Ph.D. in philosophy at a major university. She says her doctor still shakes his head in puzzled amazement at all the "big words" she uses. Since I do not wear my diplomas around my neck for all to see, I too have on occasion been sent to that "kitchen," where some think I obviously belong.

One such incident that has stayed with me, though I recognize it as a 13 minor offense, happened on the day of my first public poetry reading. It took place in Miami in a boat-restaurant where we were having lunch before the event. I was nervous and excited as I walked in with my notebook in my hand. An older woman motioned me to her table. Thinking (foolish me) that she wanted me to autograph a copy of my brand new slender volume of verse, I went over. She ordered a cup of coffee from me, assuming that I was the waitress. Easy enough to mistake my poems for menus, I suppose. I know that it wasn't an intentional act of cruelty, yet of all the good things that happened that day, I remember that scene most clearly, because it reminded me of what I had to overcome before anyone would take me seriously. In retrospect I understand that my anger gave my reading fire, that I have almost always taken doubts in my abilities as a challenge—and that the result is, most times, a feeling of satisfaction at having won a convert when I see the cold, appraising eyes warm to my words, the body language change, the smile that indicates that I have opened some avenue for communication. That day

I read to that woman and her lowered eyes told me that she was embarrassed at her little faux pas, and when I willed her to look up at me, it was my victory, and she graciously allowed me to punish her with my full attention. We shook hands at the end of the reading, and I never saw her again. She has probably forgotten the whole thing but maybe not.

14 Yet I am one of the lucky ones. My parents made it possible for me to acquire a stronger footing in the mainstream culture by giving me the chance at an education. And books and art have saved me from the harsher forms of ethnic and racial prejudice that many of my Hispanic *compañeras* have had to endure. I travel a lot around the United States, reading from my books of poetry and my novel, and the reception I most often receive is one of positive interest by people who want to know more about my culture. There are, however, thousands of Latinas without the privilege of an education or the entrée into society that I have. For them life is a struggle against the misconceptions perpetuated by the myth of the Latina as whore, domestic or criminal. We cannot change this by legislating the way people look at us. The transformation, as I see it, has to occur at a much more individual level. My personal goal in my public life is to try to replace the old pervasive stereotypes and myths about Latinas with a much more interesting set of realities. Every time I give a reading, I hope the stories I tell, the dreams and fears I examine in my work, can achieve some universal truth which will get my audience past the particulars of my skin color, my accent, or my clothes.

15 I once wrote a poem in which I called us Latinas "God's brown daughters." This poem is really a prayer of sorts, offered upward, but also, through the human-to-human channel of art, outward. It is a prayer for communication, and for respect. In it, Latin women pray "in Spanish to an Anglo God / with a Jewish heritage," and they are "ferently hoping / that if not omnipotent, / at least He be bilingual."

EXPLORING IDEAS

1. Discuss the assumptions underlying the idea that a girl's modesty and virtue are the same as family honor.
2. Why are the dress traditions of Latin women interpreted as a "come-on" by men? Brainstorm the issue of women's clothing being misinterpreted as a sexual signal.
3. Write an essay with the following thesis statement: "Most adolescents feel out of step much of the time."
4. Brainstorm why a woman's "honor" is usually interpreted as sexual, while a man's honor usually has nothing to do with sexuality. Write an essay defining "honor" in male terms and then in female terms.

5. Discuss the metaphor of "Hot Tamale" for the Latin female. Why have such words as "sizzling" and "smoldering" become associated with Latin women? Is this a stereotype created by the media, or are there other sources?

6. Cofer describes a male-female "ritual" in which young males and females play a courting or flirting game. Brainstorm a similar courting ritual in your own culture or, if you are Hispanic, a different courting ritual. Describe the ritual.

7. Are Latin women more likely to be the victims of sexual harassment on the job than others? Without statistical data, how could you support such an argument?

8. Cofer says that instead of being perceived as someone's wife or mother, as a white woman would have been, she was seen by the man who sang the obscene song as "merely a character in his cartoon-populated universe." Brainstorm this concept of being taken for a character in a cartoon-populated universe. Describe the characteristics of cartoon characters. What does it mean to perceive human beings in such a manner?

9. Cofer talks about the image of the Latina in the United States as being "media-engendered." Brainstorm another media-engendered image you are familiar with. Use specific details to describe the image. Discuss what damage this image causes.

10. Cofer says she wants people to get past the "particulars" of her skin color, accent, and clothes. Is that ever possible? If one's skin color, accent, and clothes are particular to a person, is it ever possible to ignore it?

EXPLORING RHETORIC

1. What is the value of opening this essay with an incident or anecdote? How would the essay have been different if Cofer had begun with paragraph 6, where she begins to generalize about her subject?
2. Why does Cofer say she belongs to Rita Moreno's gene pool? Rita Moreno, who is Latina, played a role in *West Side Story* (not María), and has occasionally played roles in which she exaggerates the stereotypes of Latinas. She also has complained that because of these portrayals, she has been typecast unfairly. Discuss other sources of the stereotypes of the Latina from popular culture images.
3. María, a character from the musical *West Side Story*, is a modern version of Juliet from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Why would Cofer resent being referred to as María? Read the essay by Robert Heilbroner on stereotypes elsewhere in this part.
4. Discuss the effectiveness of Cofer's metaphor about being on an island like Alcatraz rather than a tropical island. Is the metaphor appropriate to the subject matter and tone of the essay?
5. If Cofer's purpose is to dispel the myth of the Latin woman, why does she emphasize the cultural traditions of growing up Latina that give rise to those stereotypes? Does her emphasis weaken her argument or strengthen it?

change you are proposing will have bad effects as well as good, mention the bad effects and explain how they are outweighed by the good. As long as your reasoning and evidence are sound, such admissions will not weaken your essay; on the contrary, readers will appreciate your fairness.

- *Have you used transitions to signal the sequence and relative importance of events?* Transitions between sentences can help you pinpoint causes or effects (*for this reason, as a result*), show the steps in a sequence (*first, second, third*), link events in time (*in the same month*), specify duration (*a year later*), and indicate the weights you assign events (*equally important, even more crucial*). (See also *transitions* in the Glossary.)

A NOTE ON THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Analyzing our cultural identity often leads writers to ask what causes a particular identity or what its effects are. The authors in this chapter attempt to pinpoint how their own cultural makeup works in their lives. In a paragraph (p. 299), Amy Tan discusses the effects of the language spoken within immigrant families like her own. In another paragraph (p. 300), Sherman Alexie explains the influences—both Native American and Western—on his identity. In essays, Judith Ortiz Cofer (next page) and Aliza Kimhachandra (p. 313) discuss being on the receiving end of ethnic stereotypes, while Barbara Ehrenreich writes of having no specific “cultural baggage” (p. 319).

Prejudices are the refuge of those who cannot think for themselves.

—Comtesse Diane

Prejudice is a seeping, dark stain, I think, more difficult to fight than hatred—which is powerful and violent and somehow more honest.

—Josephine Lawrence

As surely as night follows day, our country will fail in its democracy because of race prejudice unless we root it out.

—Pearl S. Buck

Journal Response At one time or another, almost everyone has been the object of other people's stereotypes or prejudices—because of skin color, style of dress, activities, weight, or physical condition, among other possible factors. Write in your journal about a time when you felt or knew that assumptions were being made about you because of some outward characteristic.

Judith Ortiz Cofer

Judith Ortiz Cofer, who was born in Puerto Rico, is a writer and a teacher of literature and writing at the University of Georgia in Athens. Her works include *The Latin Deli* (1993) and many other books of poems and stories. She has been anthologized in *The Best American Essays*, *The Norton Book of Women's Lives*, *The Pushcart Prize*, and *the O. Henry Prize Stories*. She received a PEN/Martha Albrand Special Citation in nonfiction for *Silent Danc-ing* (1990) as well as the Anisfield Wolf Book Award for *The Latin Deli*. She recently coedited an anthology of essays, *Sleeping with One Eye Open: Women Writers and the Art of Survival* (1999). Cofer has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Witter Bynner Foundation for poetry. Her most recent book is *Woman in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer* (2000).

Don't Misread My Signals

“Don't Misread My Signals” first appeared in *Glamour* magazine. Stereotyped in her youth because of her Puerto Rican heritage, Ortiz knows well the damage that ethnicity can do.

On a bus to London from Oxford University, where I was earning some graduate credits one summer, a young man, obviously fresh

from a pub, approached my seat. With both hands over his heart, he went down on his knees in the aisle and broke into an Irish tenor's rendition of "Maria" from *West Side Story*.¹ I was not amused. "Maria" had followed me to London, reminding me of a prime fact of my life: you can leave the island of Puerto Rico, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you're a Latina, especially one who so clearly belongs to Rita Moreno's gene pool, the island travels with you.

Growing up in New Jersey and wanting most of all to belong, I lived in two completely different worlds. My parents designed our life as a microcosm of their *casas*² on the island—we spoke Spanish, ate Puerto Rican food bought at the *bodega*³ and practiced strict Catholicism complete with Sunday mass in Spanish.

I was kept under tight surveillance by my parents, since my virtue and modesty were, by their cultural equation, the same as their honor. As teenagers, my friends and I were lectured constantly on how to behave as proper *señoritas*. But it was a conflicting message we received, since our Puerto Rican mothers also encouraged us to look and act like women by dressing us in clothes our Anglo schoolmates and their mothers found too "mature" and flashy. I often felt humiliated when I appeared at an American friend's birthday party wearing a dress more suitable for a semiformal. At Puerto Rican festivities, neither the music nor the colors we wore could be too loud.

I remember Career Day in high school, when our teachers told us to come dressed as if for a job interview. That morning I agonized in front of my closet, trying to figure out what a "career girl" would wear, because the only model I had was Marlo Thomas⁴ on TV. To me and my Puerto Rican girlfriends, dressing up meant wearing our mother's ornate jewelry and clothing.

At school that day, the teachers assailed us for wearing "everything at once"—meaning too much jewelry and too many acces-

¹ *West Side Story*, a musical loosely based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, depicts the clash between white and Puerto Rican street gangs. Also in this paragraph "Maria" is a song from the musical about one of the main characters, a Puerto Rican girl, and Rita Moreno (born 1931) played the role of another Puerto Rican in the movie version. [Editor's note.]

² Spanish, "houses." [Editor's note.]

³ Spanish, a small grocery store. [Editor's note.]

⁴ An American actress (born 1938), best known for her role as a modern, independent career woman on the late 1960s sitcom *That Girl*. [Editor's note.]

sories. And it was painfully obvious that the other students in their tailored skirts and silk blouses thought we were hopeless and vulgar. The way they looked at us was a taste of the cultural clash that awaited us in the real world, where prospective employers and men on the street would often misinterpret our tight skirts and bright colors as a come-on.

It is custom, not chromosomes, that leads us to choose scarlet over pale pink. Our mothers had grown up on a tropical island where the natural environment was a riot of primary colors, where showing your skin was one way to keep cool as well as to look sexy. On the island, women felt free to dress and move provocatively since they were protected by the traditions and laws of a Spanish Catholic system of morality and machismo, the main rule of which was: *You may look at my sister, but if you touch her I will kill you.* The extended family and church structure provided them with a circle of safety on the island; if a man "wronged" a girl, everyone would close in to save her family honor.

Off-island, signals often get mixed. When a Puerto Rican girl who is dressed in her idea of what is attractive meets a man from the mainstream culture who has been trained to react to certain types of clothing as a sexual signal, a clash is likely to take place. She is seen as a Hot Tamale, a sexual firebrand. I learned this lesson at my first formal dance when my date leaned over and painfully planted a sloppy, overeager kiss on my mouth. When I didn't respond with sufficient passion, he said in a resentful tone: "I thought you Latin girls were supposed to mature early." It was the first time I would feel like a fruit or vegetable—I was supposed to *ripen*, not just grow into womanhood like other girls.

These stereotypes, though rarer, still surface in my life. I recently stayed at a classy metropolitan hotel. After having dinner with a friend, I was returning to my room when a middle-aged man in a tuxedo stepped directly into my path. With his champagne glass extended toward me, he exclaimed, "Evita!"⁵

Blocking my way, he bellowed the song "Don't Cry For Me, Argentina." Playing to the gathering crowd, he began to sing loudly a ditty to the tune of "La Bamba"—except the lyrics were about a girl

⁵ Eva de Peron (1919–52), known as "Evita," was the first lady of Argentina from 1946 to 1952. "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" (next paragraph) is a song from *Evita*, a musical about her life. [Editor's note.]

named Maria whose exploits all rhymed with her name and gonorrhea.

I knew that this same man—probably a corporate executive, even worldly by most standards—would never have regaled a white woman with a dirty song in public. But to him, I was just a character in his universe of “others,” all cartoons.

Still, I am one of the lucky ones. There are thousands of Latinas without the privilege of the education that my parents gave me. For them every day is a struggle against the misconceptions perpetuated by the myth of the Latina as a whore, domestic worker or criminal.

Rather than fight these pervasive stereotypes, I try to replace them with a more interesting set of realities. I travel around the United States reading from my books of poetry and my novel. With the stories I tell, the dreams and fears I examine in my work, I try to get my audience past the particulars of my skin color, my accent or my clothes.

I once wrote a poem in which I called Latinas “God’s brown daughters.” It is really a prayer, of sorts, for communication and respect. In it, Latin women pray “in Spanish to an Anglo God / with a Jewish heritage,” and they are “fervently hoping / that if not omnipotent, / at least He be bilingual.”

Meaning

1. In paragraph 1 Cofer says, “you can leave the island of Puerto Rico, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you’re a Latina, especially one who so clearly belongs to Rita Moreno’s gene pool, the island travels with you.” How would you paraphrase this statement? What does it say about the enduring effect of stereotypes on Cofer’s identity?
2. What explanations does Cofer offer for styles of dress on Puerto Rico? What does she mean when she states that “custom, not chromosomes, [...] leads us to choose scarlet over pale pink” (paragraph 6)? What reactions do such styles of dress often provoke outside of Puerto Rico?
3. In what way does the author regard herself as “lucky” (paragraph 11)? How does she attempt to combat stereotypes?
4. If any of the following words are new to you, try to guess their meanings from their context in Cofer’s essay. Look up the words in a dictionary to check your guesses, and then use each word in a sentence or two of your own.

surveillance (3)	misinterpret (5)	regaled (10)
agonized (4)	chromosomes (6)	pervasive (12)
ornate (4)	mainstream (7)	fervently (13)
assailed (5)	gonorrhea (9)	omnipotent (13)

Purpose and Audience

1. What seems to be Cofer’s primary purpose in this piece? Does she want to express her frustration at being the target of ethnic stereotyping, or does she want in some way to educate her readers? How can you tell?
2. The poem Cofer quotes in paragraph 13 contains a plea. How does this plea relate to the purpose of her essay?
3. To whom does Cofer seem to be writing here? Why do you think so?

Method and Structure

1. How well does cause-and-effect analysis suit Cofer’s subject of the ethnic stereotyping to which she has been subjected? Does this method provide an effective means of achieving her purpose?
2. At the beginning and near the end of her essay, Cofer offers anecdotes about being sung to by strangers (paragraphs 1 and 8–10). How are the experiences similar and how are they different? Why do you think Cofer opens with the one rather than the other?
3. Other Methods Aside from cause-and-effect analysis, what other method does Cofer use extensively to show the kinds of stereotyping she has suffered? Why does she use it?

Language

1. Cofer uses several Spanish words, such as *casas*, *bodega*, and *señoritas*. Why do you think she chooses to do so? What do the words add to the essay?
2. The Spanish word *maduro* means both “mature” and “ripe.” How is this linguistic overlap reflected in Cofer’s reaction to her date’s comment at her first formal dance (paragraph 7)? Does it seem likely that a non-Spanish-speaking person would make the same connection? Why, or why not?

Writing Topics

1. Journal to Essay In your journal entry (p. 307), you wrote about a time when you felt yourself to be stereotyped because of some outward characteristic. Now use your experience as the starting point for an

essay modeled loosely on Cofer's. What are the reasons for the appearance or behavior that draws out the prejudice of others? What effects of that prejudice?

2.

Aaron, Jane E., ed. *The Compact Reader: Short Essays by Method and Theme*. 7th Ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003.

... why does a person's ... affect others' opinions of that person? Are opinions formed on the basis of clothing generally fair or unfair? Does clothing serve a useful function in guiding our responses to others? For example, what if a person deliberately dresses to provoke a negative reaction? Should he or she be judged in the same light as someone whose religion requires seemingly strange clothing choices? Should clothing be judged at all? Considering the answers to these and other questions that may occur to you, write an essay that explains your idea of the role of clothing in the interaction of people.

3. **Cultural Considerations** In a longer version of this essay, Cofer criticizes the communications media for offering images of Latin women mainly as "hot tamales," domestic workers, or criminals. Do you agree or disagree that the media often portray people, especially minorities, in a negative way? Write an essay exploring the media's role in perpetuating or undermining negative stereotypes.
4. **Connections** Both Cofer and Noel Perrin, in "The Androgynous Man" (p. 287), close their essays by envisioning a God who is like them in some way. Perrin proposes that God, like himself, is balanced between masculine and feminine. Cofer prays for a God who, like herself, embraces ethnic diversity and understanding. What do these authors' wishes say about their common desire for greater diversity and tolerance? Write an essay comparing their visions.

in of

... ignore complexity, change, and individuality.

—Anna Quindlen

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

We all know that we are unique individuals, but we tend to see others as representatives of groups.

—Deborah Tannen

Journal Response Write a short journal entry about stereotypes that you have observed or experienced in American society concerning ethnicity, age, social class, sexual preference, religion, or other attributes.

Aliza Kimhachandra

Aliza Kimhachandra was born in 1979 in Oklahoma and attends Boston College. When asked to identify herself in terms of nationality, she states that she's both American and Thai. Kimhachandra says that her essay "is about a cross between two ethnic cultures but that culture could also mean a post-office-work culture, a Boston College culture, a water polo or Gold's Gym culture, a string-quartet culture. Prejudice, discrimination, and hate may begin to diminish as we begin to realize that we all are the same, we are all multicultural." Kimhachandra currently resides in Newton, Massachusetts.

Banana

"Banana" was first published in *Fresh Ink*, a collection of first-year writing by students at Boston College. The essay tackles the idea that an individual can be a synthesis of two different people, personalities, ethnicities, or races. According to Kimhachandra, America is made up of "bananas," whether or not each person's differences are visible.

So you call me a banana. Well, maybe I am one. What's it to you anyway? I didn't ask to be born one, but I was, and you will just have to accept me for what I am. A banana is a wonderful fruit.

My parents come from Thailand, a beautiful tropical country in Southeast Asia. I was born in America, but I am still Thai at heart. Actually, my yellow skin has been something of an asset. Attached to my appearance is a long string of stereotypes: Asian girls are quiet and obedient; they all play the piano; they are smart little robots that do everything right; they are like computers, studying all the time and storing information. There is not much creativity in these robots, but they can make the grade and that's what's important. Throughout primary and most of secondary school it was very easy for me to fall into these stereotypes. All those things that parents, teachers, and administrators like. I was a very quiet student. The only time I spoke was when I was sure what I was about to say was not stupid. This was usually a correct answer to some math problem, which led everyone to believe I was a whiz. I never disrupted class. I always did what I was told. I played the piano. I was the stereotypical Asian kid.

To add to my "yellowness," after years of being ignorant about my Asian heritage, I became a self-made expert on Thai culture. In high school, people would come to me and say, "You were born and raised in America, how come you're so Thai? How do you know so much about Thailand? And how come you can still speak Thai?" Well, it's inevitable. When most of your life you've seen people with round light eyes, light skin, and light hair, characteristics you don't have, and then you take a trip and begin to see people with slanted dark eyes, dark hair, and a tan complexion, characteristics you do have, you have to question yourself. "Hey, self, why do you look like those people when you speak and act like these people?" This question swallowed me up and I had to find the answer. In my search, I ended up teaching myself to speak and read Thai and learning all I could about Thai traditions and customs. It's really interesting how much ethnicity affects a person's way of thinking. It's like a conscience. For example, if you ask an Asian what she needs to eat to become full, she would most likely respond by saying, "Rice." But if you ask an Irish person the same question, wouldn't that person say, "Potatoes"? Anyway, you understand what I mean.

My white part, under the yellow skin, is my American side. It's a funny thing. I was kind of living a double life all through school. While in school, it was more advantageous to act Asian, so that's what I did. Outside school, in society, it was more advantageous to act American. Outgoing and friendly, talkative, I became all these outside the classroom. Friends from school have always found it strange that my personality changes so much depending on whether I

am inside or outside class. It's just a matter of fitting in and assessing what kind of behavior is more advantageous in certain places. When I tell them this, they understand why I change, but it is still difficult for them to understand how I can be so American and also be so Thai. Well, everyone knows that America is made up of immigrants. In the area I live in now, there are many Americans of Italian descent. They have Western features, for the most part they speak with an American accent, and their families have been in America for generations. They don't question whether they are American or not and neither do their peers and colleagues; of course they are American. But if we look closer at these families, they are still very Italian. They eat a lot of pasta, spend hours preparing meat sauce from an old family recipe, abide by the Catholic Church. They are still very Italian but are also very American.

After a long period of thinking and trying to understand who I am—am I really able to be both Thai and American? am I more Thai or more American?—I realized that I really am both. A unique mixture of East and West. So I began to act like both. I took the bad aspects of the cultures, like female inferiority, and threw them away; then I picked up their good characteristics and meshed them together to make . . . well, me. Now I can be smart, loud, obedient yet daring, all the good stuff that is associated with being Asian and being American. The next thing I need to do is to try and get others to understand this about me.

Most of those people who say I am so Asian are white Americans. On the other hand, those who say I am so American are Asian. If my analysis is correct, this stems from the very human tendency of a group of similar people to notice more readily the differences in people who are not so similar to themselves. To the typical white American, who sees "American" acts every day and is immune to them, my Asian side is definitely different and they notice these differences. The same goes for the Asians. To them, I am very American because they notice the American things I do while they are immune to the Asian things. An example: If I bow to an elder in the Thai community, non-Thais will take more notice than Thais would. On the other hand, if I'm wearing a tank top and shorts, Thais will take more notice because for Thais dressing this way in public is improper. I think it's funny how neither group can accept me as both Asian and American. I guess it's just human nature to try to put things into specific categories. It's too bad, though, because it shows that people don't realize what America is—a wonderful nation enriched by the diversity of her people.

So I am a banana. Being a banana is not at all bad. There are many advantages to being one. It is a unique fruit that has its own characteristics, way of growth, and way of presenting itself to the world. It is a distinct member of the fruit family. It is sweet and satisfying. I love being a banana. And have you ever noticed that after peeling back its golden yellow skin, the ripe pulp of a banana is actually a shade of pale yellow? A harmonious mixture of yellow and white together in a sweet, wonderful fruit. It's a nice color, perfectly acceptable, but not many people notice it. Here's my final question: If I am a banana, unique, sweet, wonderful . . . what kind of fruit are you?

Meaning

1. In her first paragraph Kimhachandra asks a question and then offers a response. What is a *banana* in the context of this essay? How does Kimhachandra's introduction effectively summarize the main idea of her essay?
 2. In paragraph 6 Kimhachandra refers to the "very human tendency of a group of similar people to notice more readily the differences in people who are not so similar to themselves." Does she condemn this tendency?
 3. Based on their context in Kimhachandra's essay, try to guess the meanings of any of the following words. Test your guesses in a dictionary, and then try to use each word in a sentence or two of your own.
- | | | |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|
| whiz (2) | advantageous (4) | immune (6) |
| heritage (3) | abide (4) | harmonious (7) |
| inevitable (3) | | |

Purpose and Audience

1. Do you believe that Kimhachandra writes mainly to convince others of her viewpoint or to articulate her feelings more clearly to herself? Make specific references to the text to support your opinion.
2. Whom is Kimhachandra addressing in the opening sentence? What do this sentence and the rest of the essay tell you about the author's conception of her audience?
3. In paragraph 7 Kimhachandra poses a final question to readers. What does this query reveal about both her purpose and her audience?

Method and Structure

1. Why might Kimhachandra rely on cause-and-effect analysis to develop her ideas? What are some causes of ethnic stereotypes, in her opinion? What is the effect of the human tendency to categorize others?

2. Why do you think Kimhachandra chooses to make so much of *banana*, a term often used as an ethnic slur? How does she use the symbol of a tropical fruit to combat the stereotypes she experiences?
3. Other Methods In addition to cause-and-effect analysis, Kimhachandra also relies on narration (Chapter 5) and example (Chapter 6). What does each of these other methods contribute to her essay?

Language

1. How would you describe the author's tone? Is she angry? optimistic? passionate? self-confident? hesitant? cheerful?
2. Kimhachandra begins her essay with "So." She also uses interjections such as "well" (paragraphs 3, 4, and 5) and "hey" (3). How would you characterize this language? What does it add to Kimhachandra's essay?

Writing Topics

1. **Journal to Essay** On the basis of your journal entry and your reaction to the quotations at the beginning of "Banana" (p. 313), expand your ideas about what Kimhachandra calls the "very human tendency" to pigeonhole those who are different from ourselves. Do you agree with Kimhachandra that this reaction is inevitable? At what point does stereotyping become harmful and destructive? Do you think that it is always harmful, or can it sometimes be beneficial? Write from a personal perspective, as Kimhachandra does, or from a broader societal perspective. If you choose the latter course, however, pin your meaning down with plenty of details and examples.
2. Kimhachandra writes about the effects of her dual identity as a Thai American. In addition to ethnic background, what other factors also make us who we are? In a cause-and-effect essay, explain how your age, socioeconomic background, religion, outward appearance, academic ability, or some other characteristic has helped to create your identity. If you were to choose a symbol—like Kimhachandra's banana—to represent yourself, what would that symbol be? Why?
3. **Cultural Considerations** As home for immigrants from scores of other countries, the United States thrusts together people from almost every imaginable ethnic background. Write an essay in which you consider the challenges of living in such a diverse society. What are some sources of friction? What are some advantages? To what extent should we recognize each other's differences, and to what extent should we ignore them? Use examples from your own experiences, observations, and reading.